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The Fabian Municipal Program (Second Series), No. 4.

WOMEN AS COUNCILLORS.

March, 1900.

As the law stands at present, women can sit on Parish Councils, on Urban and Rural District Councils, on Boards of Guardians, and on School Boards. They cannot sit on County Councils or Borough Councils; and in spite of the decision of the House of Commons that they should sit on the new Metropolitan Borough Councils which replace the Vestries under the London Government Act, 1899, they were expressly excluded by the House of Lords, on the motion of Lord Dunraven, on 26th June, 1899. As they had sat on the Vestries since 1894, this was a withdrawal of an established right, and consequently a deliberate step backwards in political development.

The debate in the House of Lords did not touch the practical side of the question. The supporters of the women spoke generously against Lord Dunraven and his followers, who were facetious and rather coarse in the vein usual on such occasions. Neither side seemed to understand that the Councils have to do work which cannot be done by men, and that until women sat on the London Vestries it was practically left undone at an untold cost in human suffering and public decency.

What Women are Wanted For.

One of the most important duties of the new London Councils will be the inspection of workshops under the Public Health Act. In these workshops many women are employed; and the Councils will have to inspect the sanitary accommodation provided for them, and to question them, receive their complaints, and so forth. It is contrary to English conceptions of decency that a man should make such inspections, or that women should be questioned by him or make complaints to him in such matters. When the Vestries were thrown open to women, this was at last recognized, and women inspectors were appointed. It is impossible to describe the state of things which was then discovered.

Women Inspectors not Sufficient.

But it is not enough to appoint a woman as sanitary inspector. If there are no women representatives on the Council, her position is extremely difficult and unpleasant. She cannot initiate any action on the part of the Council; and the tone in which questions concerning women are still discussed, by Peers and Vestrymen alike (a tone which is at once silenced by the presence of a woman representative) makes it practically impossible for her to approach male members of the Council on the subject of her duties.

Street Sanitation.

Again, the public sanitary accommodation in the streets of London will be in the hands of the new Councils. The needs of women were completely ignored by the London Vestries when the Fabian Society published its "Facts for Londoners" in the eighties; and it is still difficult to obtain adequate accommodation for them. But since women have been represented directly on the Vestries, matters have improved; and underground lavatories, which have become common of late years, are now provided for women as well as men, though not yet as a matter of course, and seldom without some opposition from within the Vestries. Unfortunately, the existing arrangements are quite insufficient. The lavatories for men offer two kinds of sanitary accommodation. For one no charge is made: for the other a penny is charged. In the women's lavatories there is no free accommodation: only one kind is provided at a charge of a penny. The grievance to the women of London (four out of five of them poor women) is intolerable: to men, who do not suffer from it, the thought of its existence never occurs. The plans for the newest underground lavatory in London (Leicester Square, 1900)* shew an attempt to remedy this grievance; but it still exists everywhere else. And when women are banished from the Councils, the Councillors will have no access to the women's lavatories, which will be all the worse conducted on that account.

Here, then, we have two departments of municipal work, of exceptional importance to the public health of our cities, the comfort of the citizens, and the cleanliness and decency of its less frequented places, in which the co-operation of women is absolutely necessary for efficiency, and its absence an abominable scandal.

Chivalry of the Peerage.

It may be true that the work of a Rating Committee or a Finance Committee can be done as well by men as by women. It may *seem* true that a Public Works or Parliamentary Committee can get on as well without women as with them. But there is not even the semblance of truth in such an assumption concerning Health Committees. When Lord Dunraven said to the House of Lords, "I never yet have understood that women take a particular delight in drains, or are interested in paving, or derive much joy out of ascertaining the cubic contents of buildings," he confessed to a lack of common sense and humanity for which, as an officer and a nobleman, he should atone by introducing a Bill as soon as possible to undo the mischief his thoughtlessness did last June. Had the Peers known what they were talking about, it is inconceivable that they would have tolerated the speeches they laughed at on that occasion.

Prudery of the Press.

It is hardly necessary to add that the greatest obstacles to reform in such matters are raised by the prudery of the Press, which will give the fullest publicity to such foolish quips as "How can a woman be an alder*man*?" or to coarse jests made by

* It is being erected by the Strand District Board, which will be merged in the Borough of Westminster in November next.

statesmen about divided skirts, but indignantly refuses to sully its columns with anything so shocking as a reference to an underground lavatory. All parties and all papers are alike in this: last June both the *Times* and the *Daily Chronicle* refused to insert a word to recall the House of Lords to the realities of the question.

Women on County Councils.

There are innumerable points at which Local Government, in almost all its branches, touches the personal interests of women, as well as the affairs which are admitted to be their proper business. Duties exactly similar to those of the educational and charitable bodies, on which they now sit unchallenged, are discharged by County Councils and Borough Councils. But enough stress is being laid on these in other quarters. The Fabian Society purposely devotes this leaflet to that side of the case which is at once the most unanswerable and the most liable to suppression, even at the hands of women themselves. There is, however, one matter too pressing to pass without a reminder, and that is

The Housing Question.

Everybody who has built a house knows how completely men overlook points of domestic accommodation which strike a woman at once. Men live in houses: they do not work in them. Women do work in them; and a house built without consulting them is seldom as comfortable as it might be made. A washing copper of the wrong height, or in the wrong corner, or without a sufficient breadth of masonry round it to prevent flooding of the floor through splashing, makes no difference to a man, except in so far as it may spoil his wife's temper on washing day. To his wife it may mean a pain in the back and a cold from wet feet every week. The political opponents of women are fond of insisting that their duties are with the home. That is an additional argument for giving them seats on the new Borough Councils which will have to build the homes of London's crowded-out masses.

Immediate Action.

The first step to be taken is the immediate formation in every parish in London of a committee of women to carry on unofficially the work they did officially on the Vestries. By (*a*) collecting information as to the sanitary conditions under which women work in their district; (*b*) reporting all breaches of the law to the Medical Officer of Health for the District or the Home Office; (*c*) persistently demanding the appointment of a woman inspector, or keeping in touch with her if one is already appointed; (*d*) examining the plans of new public lavatories and insisting on their containing adequate free accommodation; and (*e*) using their influence at local elections in favor of their helpers on the Councils and against their opponents, they might not only achieve much direct sanitary work, but finally force the Councillors themselves to petition for the inclusion of women in order that they may share the responsibility as well as the work of the Council.

It goes without saying that a Bill to repeal the Dunraven Exclusion Clause should be energetically and persistently pressed for.

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